EAST TIMOR - A Brief History

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East Timor is the eastern half of Timor Island, which lies about 300 miles Northwest of Darwin, Australia. East Timor was a Portuguese colony from the early 17th century until 1974, when the Portuguese began a process of decolonisation. However, the neighbouring country of Indonesia, under the military dictatorship of General Suharto, had other plans, and invaded East Timor on December 7, 1975 - just ten days after the Timorese people had proclaimed their independence.

The United Nations has never recognised Indonesia's occupation of East Timor as valid. Officially, Portugal remains the administering power, and the decolonisation process has yet to be completed. Many UN resolutions have condemned the occupation, but little concrete action has followed.

The early period of the invasion was one of indiscriminate massacre, in which whole villages and towns were wiped out, using high-tech counter-insurgency aircraft and armoured vehicles from the US, Britain and other countries, as well as napalm and defoliant herbicides similar to Agent Orange. Agriculture was completely disrupted, and a severe famine, accompanied by epidemics of disease, ensued. It is estimated that about 200,000 people, one-third of the population, have died as a result of Indonesian occupation.

In 1989, a new group of Timorese emerged into public view, the unarmed urban resistance, made up mostly of students. Their first public action was a demonstration during the Pope's visit to East Timor. Since then, they have staged a series of incredibly risky small demonstrations, mostly in Dili, and have channelled information about human rights violations to solidarity groups and other NGOs outside the country.

In October 1991, the Indonesian army opened fire on a crowd of unarmed demonstrators, many of them teenagers and children. Timorese sources have compiled a list of 270 people killed that morning, not including many who are still 'disappeared'. In the succeeding days, wounded people were murdered in the hospital, and eyewitnesses were rounded up and executed. The total death toll of November 1991 may never be known. But this time the massacre was filmed by a British journalist, and East Timor was brought to the attention of the world.

But as international pressure has increased, internal repression has become even worse. Arbitrary arrest, torture, rape and murder are all commonplace events. The death squads known as "ninjas" have become particularly active during 1995.

Yet, even in the midst of the horror, there are signs of hope. The outside world is becoming aware of the genocide in East Timor, and international pressure on Indonesia is forcing them to make some small concessions. Talks have begun between Indonesia and Portugal (still the official 'administering power'), and the possibility of Timorese representatives joining these talks has been tentatively raised. A dialogue between Timorese from inside and outside the territory has also been initiated as part of the UN talks process.

The United States last year banned small arms sales to Indonesia because of concern over human rights violations, particularly in East Timor. Some other countries, such as Canada and the Netherlands, have also imposed small sanctions of various kinds. The government of the Republic of Ireland is increasingly supportive of the Timorese cause. The British government, on the other hand, has increased its level of financial aid to Indonesia considerably, and when the US ban was announced, the Indonesian government said they would simply buy weapons from Britain instead.

The Timorese people will not give up until they are finally given their right to self-determination, a right enshrined in international law. It is up to us around the world to make sure that they no longer need to struggle alone.

British Coalition for East Timor, PO Box 2349, London E1 3HX, tel/fax 0171 252 7937